

Project targets eating habits of pupils in obesity fight

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Can a community learn to trade cookies for carrot sticks?

In an ambitious initiative to prevent obesity, 31,000 Buffalo school students today will begin to find out if it's possible to change eating habits for the better.

The project will offer weekly rewards, such as pens and key chains, to pupils in grades prekindergarten through 8 who eat fruits and vegetables at lunch. Those who eat fruits or vegetables every school day will be eligible for drawings for mountain bikes and other sports equipment.

As the project attempts in a scientific way to figure out what methods work best to improve attitudes about diet, some of the system's 54 schools will also take part in a contest in which the top three are rewarded with a schoolwide celebration. Others will have students sign pledges to eat more fruits and vegetables.

Called "Be a Power Eater: The Good Food for Great Kids Program," the first major project of the P2 Collaborative of Western New York is notable for its size and scope.

"It's an example of how a community can really come together around a critical issue," said Gretchen Fierle, executive director of P2.

The rate of childhood obesity has increased significantly in recent years, with more than 9 million children over the age of 6 now considered overweight. The rapid rise is troubling to public health experts because obesity can lead to a variety of health problems.

The collaborative is a coalition of local health insurance plans, physicians, faith-based organizations, media, schools and others, including the United Auto Workers,

Roswell Park Cancer Institute and the American Heart Association. It formed in 2003 to design communitywide projects to achieve two goals: lower the risk factors for heart disease, and improve the diagnosis and care of breast cancer.

Parts of Western New York are known for having some of the highest rates of heart disease in the nation.

The collaborative is an acknowledgment that despite a host of prevention programs over the years, traditional methods have had little success at combating one of the most common yet preventable medical conditions.

"The risk factors for heart disease - diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, smoking, physical inactivity - are pervasive and may relate to entrenched behaviors. If we're going to change the habits of a community, working through the traditional health care system is unlikely to be successful," said Dr. Michael Cropp, president and chief executive officer of HMO Independent Health.

Cropp said that for a variety of reasons, most patients with risk factors don't reach goals to lower their chance of disease because they don't get managed effectively or fail to follow through on recommendations from physicians.

"It's a poor record. It suggests that change coming from within is more likely to work than something that is imposed from the top down," he said.

The collaborative hopes to close the gap so significantly that Buffalo is considered a national leader in controlling heart disease risk factors.

"What makes us different from what you have seen before, is our links to the community. We want to have schools, churches and work sites view themselves as agents of change," he said.

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More than 30 percent of 6- to 19-year-olds in the United States are overweight; more than 15 percent are obese, according to the American Obesity Association. Researchers say children born today could constitute the first generation in U.S. history with a lower life expectancy than its predecessor.

"We owe it to our children to do something about that," said Fierle.

The \$1 million Power Eater project is the first of what the group hopes will be a series of high-profile annual projects that will work in conjunction with smaller efforts during the year. It's designed to provide research data that can be used by others to overcome childhood obesity.

Half the funds for Power Eater were raised largely through a state Health Department grant and contributions from local foundations. The other half came from pledges of in-kind services.

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